

ASSYRIAN EMPIRE BUILDING AND ARAMIZATION OF CULTURE
AS SEEN FROM TELL AHMAR/TIL BARSIB*

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Résumé –Les mouvements politiques et ethniques qui ont affecté la vallée de l’Euphrate nord-syrien depuis l’effondrement du système politique de l’âge du Bronze jusqu’à la chute de l’Empire assyrien sont passés en revue en prenant, lorsqu’il y a lieu, Tell Ahmar-Til Barsib comme exemple de référence. Quatre périodes sont considérées : (1) La transition de l’âge du Bronze à l’âge du Fer, (2) la reconstitution de structures politiques stables et leur signification pour définir une éventuelle culture araméenne, (3) l’absorption de ces structures dans l’empire assyrien en pleine expansion, (4) l’apparition d’une *koinè* culturelle unissant centre et périphérie pendant le dernier siècle d’existence de l’Empire assyrien.

Abstract –This paper intends to review the political and ethnic movements that took place along the North-Syrian Euphrates river from the collapse of the Bronze Age political system down to the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire, taking, when appropriate, Tell Ahmar-Til Barsib as an illustration of these developments. Four main periods are identified: (1) the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, (2) the reconstruction of stable political structures and their significance for the definition of a possible Aramaean culture, (3) the absorption of these structures into an expanding Assyrian empire, (4) the emergence of a cultural *koinè* linking centre and periphery in the last century of the Assyrian empire.

خلاصة – إستناداً إلى تل أحمر - تل برسب، يمكن إستعراض التحركات السياسية والإثنية التي أثرت على وادي الفرات في منطقة الشمال - السوري، منذ انهيار النظام السياسي للعصر البرونزي حتى سقوط الدولة الآشورية. يمكن إعتقاد مراحل أربع:
١ - المرحلة الإنتقالية بين العصر البرونزي والعصر الحديدي، ٢ - إعادة تأسيس هيئات سياسية متينة والتأكيد على مقوماتها بغية تحديد مقومات ممكنة من الثقافة الأرامية، ٣ - إنصهار هذه الهيئات في الدولة الآشورية وهي في أوج تمددها، ٤ - ظهور حالة ثقافية كاملة KOINE توحد منطق المركزية و الضواحي إبّان القرن الأخير لوجود الدولة الآشورية.

Tell Ahmar, site of ancient Til Barsib, is usually considered as an Aramaean city, capital of the Aramaean kingdom of Bît Adini, until it was conquered by Shalmaneser III, king of Assyria, in 856 BC. This widespread view, however, has never been really consistent with the evidence recovered from the site since a French archaeological expedition led by François Thureau-Dangin started excavations there in 1927¹. Neo-Hittite reliefs and Luwian inscriptions, discovered in rather large numbers by Thureau-Dangin’s expedition, were in complete contradiction with the assumed Aramaean nature of the settlement. The contradiction was made worse by the fact that Aramaean evidence was very slim and, for the time prior to the Assyrian conquest, totally absent. Various attempts have been made to

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1. THUREAU-DANGIN 1929; THUREAU-DANGIN & DUNAND 1936.

reconcile the accepted view, based on Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, with the available evidence², but the debate is still going on³.

Excavations conducted at the site, from 1988 onwards, firstly by an Australian team then by a Belgian expedition, yielded significant additional information⁴, which, combined with a reinterpretation of older evidence, help to better understand the relevant problems.

The example of Tell Ahmar is representative of the main problem raised by the emergence of the Aramaeans, namely the combination of textual and archaeological evidence. The problem is essentially historical in nature. It concerns archaeology only to the extent that prior knowledge of the possible existence of Aramaeans is necessary for the archaeologists to look for traces of an Aramaean presence in the archaeological record. Moreover, no archaeologist knows exactly what to look for. Aramaeans, in textual records, are identified either by their name —“Aram” and all derived forms— and by their language, essentially personal names and, from the 9th century onwards, lapidary inscriptions. Of all this, only lapidary inscriptions directly concern archaeologists. Consequently, archaeological evidence cannot but consist of a problematic correlation between changes in material culture and the emergence of the Aramaeans as it is evidenced by textual records. However, it must always be kept in mind that changes in the material culture of the Early Iron Age do not necessarily have the Aramaean irruption as their sole cause.

I. FROM BRONZE TO IRON AGE – MIDDLE ASSYRIANS AND ARAMAEANS

The first confrontation between Aramaeans and Assyrians dates back to the Middle Assyrian period at the time of king Tiglath-pileser I, around 1100 BC. Both Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076) and his second successor Aššur-bêl-kala (1073-1056) had to fight Aramaeans all along the Euphrates river, i.e., among others, in the Tell Ahmar region⁵. And, actually, it is in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser I that the name “Aramaeans” made its first appearance.

Evidence concerning this period has been found at the site. A clear stratigraphic sequence has been revealed in the east part of the tell. The relevant strata were excavated in trenches A27, A29, S1-3, S14 on the eastern slope of the tell. Strata will be referred to by numbers that are specific to this area. The composition and numbering of the strata may be different in other parts of the site. A preliminary, and more detailed, account of this stratigraphy has already been given elsewhere⁶.

The first relevant stratum is Stratum 7. It consists mainly of open surfaces above a stratum with a few Nuzi sherds. The distinction between Stratum 7 and Stratum 6, which is immediately above, is not always crystal-clear. They must therefore be considered together. Stratum 6 is marked by a series of small constructions of mud bricks resting on a stone base. No complete structure could be excavated (fig. 1).

A curious object, made of bone, comes from Stratum 7 (fig. 2). It shows a lion paw carved in a style that is strongly reminiscent of some of the Karkemiš reliefs from the Water Gate that are now dated to the 11th century. Definitely Middle Assyrian is a cylinder seal found on a floor of Stratum 6 (fig. 3).

A preliminary study of the pottery from Strata 6 and 7 conducted by Martin Makinson shows that Middle Assyrian shapes and wares are frequent, indicating a Middle Assyrian presence at the site (fig. 4). Progressively, however, shapes and wares characteristic of Iron II emerge, such as Brown-Burnished open bowls.

2. THUREAU-DANGIN in THUREAU-DANGIN & DUNAND 1936, p. 134; LANDSBERGER 1948, p. 35; USSISHKIN 1971, p. 43; ORTHMANN 1971, p. 182-184; HAWKINS 1980, p. 156; HAWKINS 1982, p. 375; IKEDA 1984, p. 34; BUNNENS 1995; BUNNENS 1999.

3. FALES 2005a, p. XXIX-XXXIV; BUNNENS 2006, p. 85-102.

4. See, provisionally, BUNNENS 1997; BUNNENS forthcoming.

5. YOUNGER Jr. 2007, p. 154-158, gives translations of relevant texts.

6. BUNNENS forthcoming.

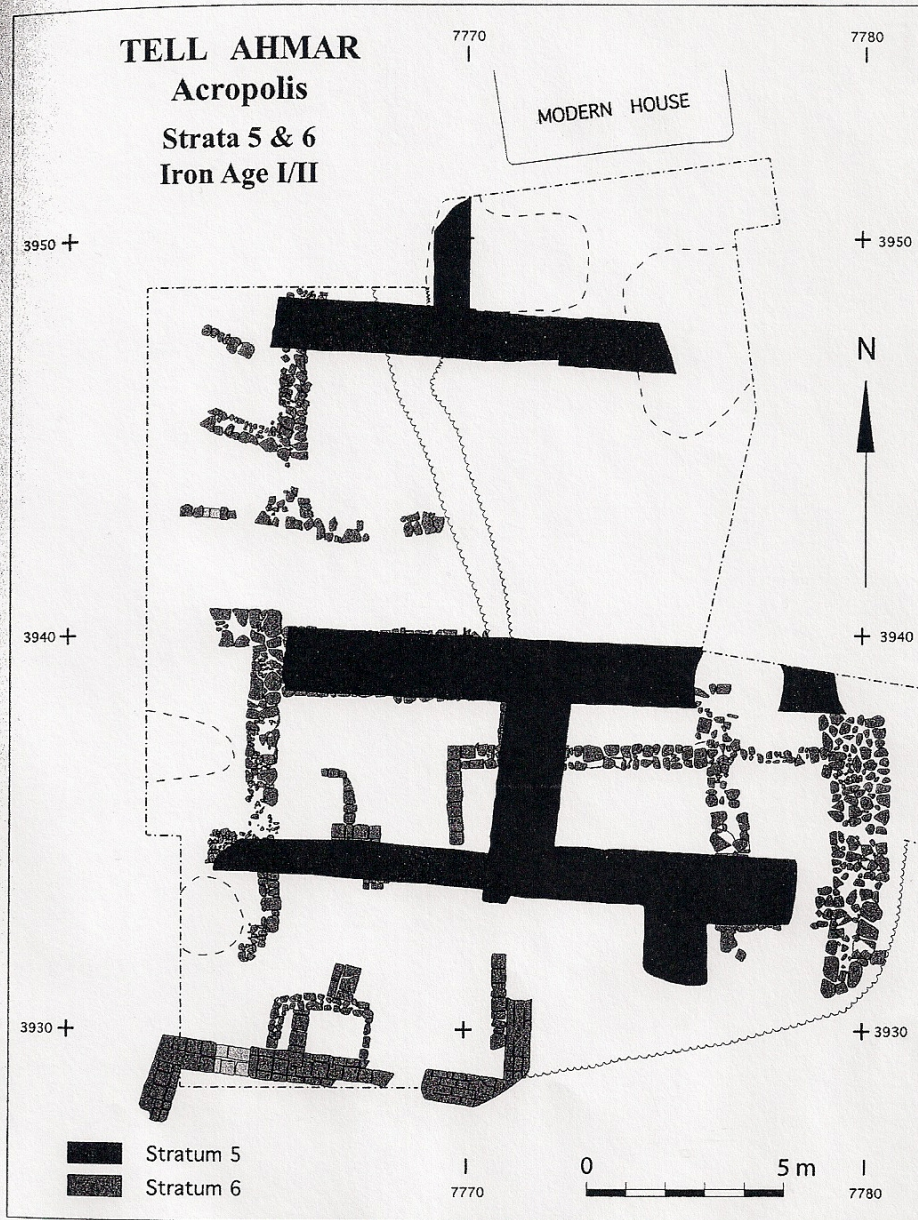


Figure 1: Plan of Strata 6 and 5 in the eastern part of the acropolis of Tell Ahmar.

A radiocarbon date gives a time range between the 13th and the 11th century BC for the destruction of Level 6⁷. The stratigraphy shows a progressive evolution, no real disruption, in the occupation of the site at a time that must correspond to the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, with pottery giving evidence on the development of typical North-Syrian Iron Age pottery but also including Middle Assyrian types that decrease in number from one stratum to the other. Rare but

7. The analysis was made at the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage. Date UtC-9925: 2950±35BP. 68.2% confidence: 1260/1080 BC (0.97), 1060/1050 BC (0.03). 95.4% confidence: 1300/1020 BC (1.00).

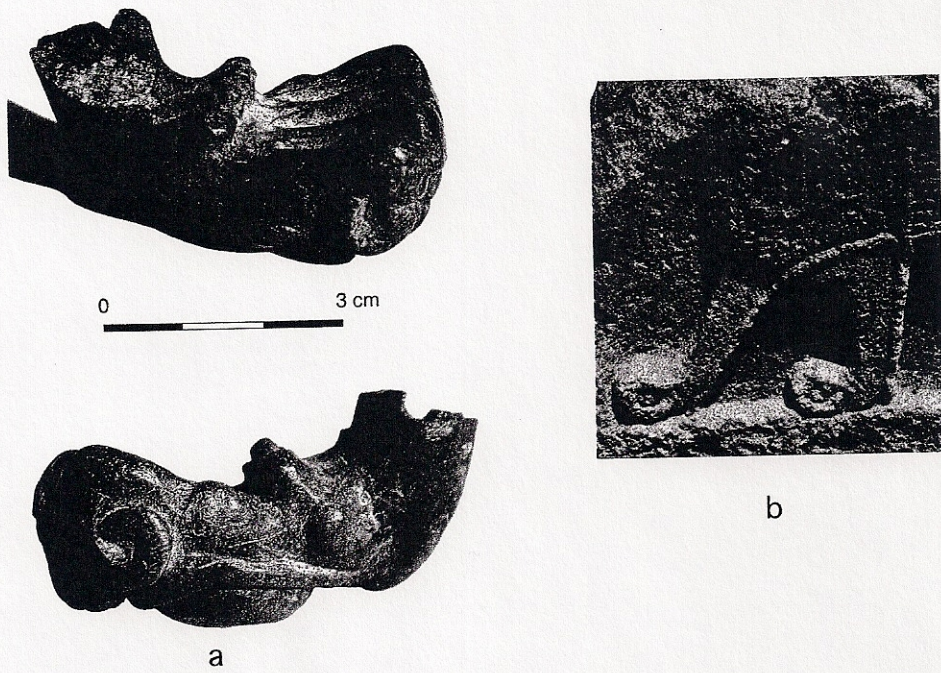


Figure 2: Lion paw from Tell Ahmar (a) and relief from Karkemiš (Woolley 1921, pl. B28b) (b).

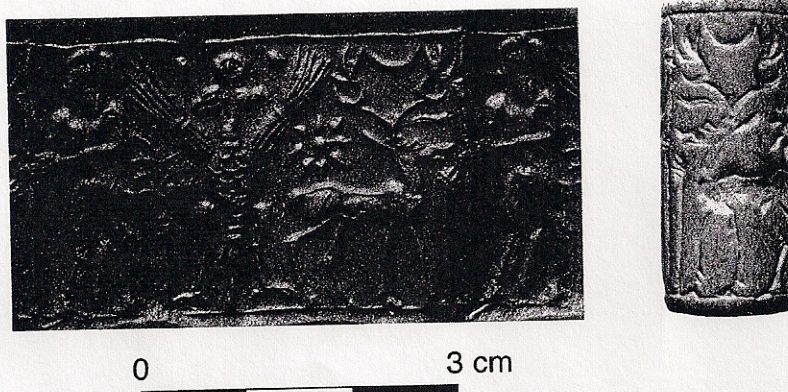


Figure 3: Middle Assyrian cylinder seal from Tell Ahmar.

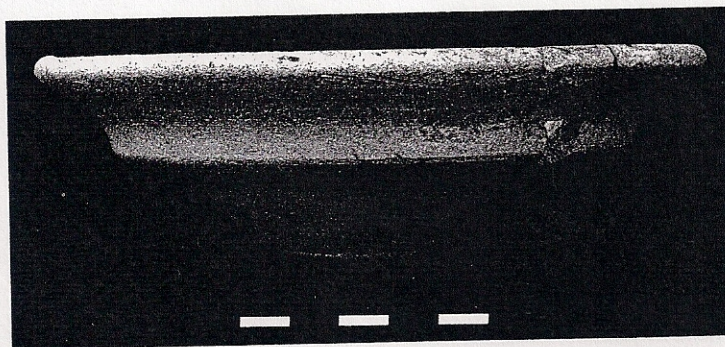


Figure 4: Middle Assyrian bowl from Tell Ahmar.

significant objects, such as a Middle Assyrian cylinder seal and a bone carved in Syro-Hittite style, suggest that local culture must have been more sophisticated than would be expected when considering the poor architectural remains with which they were associated. In terms of traditional archaeological terminology, Strata 7 and 6 at Tell Ahmar must have spanned the Iron Age I and probably part of the Iron Age II period, during which Stratum 6 came to an end. If the radiocarbon date mentioned above is accurate, this event must be placed towards the end of the time span that the date makes possible, i.e. in the 11th century.

It is during the period corresponding to Strata 7 and 6 that Tiglath-pileser I and Aššur-bêl-kala were actively fighting the Aramaeans in the Euphrates valley. According to Shalmaneser III's inscriptions, Tiglath-pileser I occupied settlements, especially Pitru and Mutkinu, on either side of the Euphrates near Tell Ahmar, and according to the same inscriptions these settlements were lost to an enigmatic "king of the land Arumu" at the time of Aššur-râbi II (1012-972)⁸. Nothing is said about Tell Ahmar itself. However, the Middle Assyrian presence that archaeology reveals at the site must be linked with the occupation of Pitru and Mutkinu, and probably other sites⁹, by Tiglath-pileser I. To some extent, the textual evidence about the region is confirmed by archaeology. As for the Aramaeans, there is little that can be said. But, in this particular case, what should we be looking for?

Aramaeans and Late Bronze/Early Iron Age Syrian population

There is no clear evidence concerning an Aramaean ethnic group identifiable as such at the end of the Late Bronze and beginning of the Iron Age. Only the mention of the gentilic "Aramaeans" in Tiglath-pileser I's inscriptions points to their existence at the beginning of the Iron Age. It is true that a few names of peoples, or tribes, are mentioned in 2nd millennium texts, that will be known as Aramaean tribes later in the 1st millennium¹⁰. But nothing is said about their ethnic identity in the 2nd millennium. On the other hand, the linguistic distinction between the Semitic languages spoken, or rather written, at the end of the Bronze Age and Aramaic is not as sharp as would be expected in the case of the emergence of a new ethnic group¹¹. This problem of the absence of the Aramaeans at a time when they should have been present—essentially the end of the Late Bronze Age—is often resolved by considering that we should find the first Aramaeans under the name *Ahlamû*¹². The reason for this is that, when Tiglath-pileser I referred to the Aramaeans, the name he used to designate them was "Aramaeans *Ahlamû*", i.e. "those of the *Ahlamû* that are Aramaean". A relationship of some sort was thus implied between *Ahlamû* and Aramaeans but not necessarily the identity of the two groups. We shall see below that this relationship may be more social than ethnic.

Concerning the ethnic composition of North-Syrian population, it is well known that there were invasions—among which that of the so-called Sea Peoples—, but their impact on the composition of Syrian population should not be overestimated. The bulk of the population remained, by and large, what it was before the crisis. Textual evidence from Ugarit and Emar, as well as other sites of the Euphrates valley, show that North-Syria was inhabited by Semitic speaking people at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Although the Semitic languages they spoke were of the West Semitic group, specific features demonstrating the existence of a kind of proto-Aramaic language cannot be found¹³. It is not until the 9th century that epigraphic evidence reveals the Aramaic language.

8. GRAYSON 1996, A.O.102.2, II 35-40, p. 19.

9. See below n. 30.

10. LIPÍŃSKI 2000a, p. 45-50.

11. ZADOK 1991, p. 107-108.

12. See, for instance, DUPONT-SOMMER 1949, p. 17; BRINKMAN 1968, p. 277-278, n. 1799, who thinks that "the two groups were at least very closely related".

13. See, e.g., LIPÍŃSKI 2000b, p. 130.

“Aramaeans” as an ethnic name was thus unknown before the late 12th and 11th century and Aramaic as an autonomous language was not formally attested before the 9th century.

Nomadism versus sedentism

It has become a common place, since M. B. Rowton’s studies, to view ancient Near Eastern society as split into two segments, one consisting of people living in sedentary settlements, politically centralized and involved in agriculture, the other more mobile, wandering from one place to another and specializing in pastoralism. The two segments would have had complementary but also, at times, conflicting relations. It is this conflicting aspect that the evidence concerning the early Aramaeans would illustrate. A tide of nomadic invaders would have overwhelmed sedentary settlements at the beginning of the Iron Age.

However, recent research has refined the picture¹⁴. It has been shown, for instance, that the same group could be sedentary for one part of the year and nomad for the other¹⁵. The notion of semi-nomads, i.e. of nomads progressively converting to a sedentary way of life, is no longer as clear-cut as it used to be. The border between nomadism and sedentism is increasingly vague. On the other hand, it should be stressed that not all mobile population groups were nomads in the way defined above. There were also people living on the fringe to escape the constraints —especially corvée labour and taxation— imposed on inhabitants of sedentary settlements. They were outlaws living from rapine as much as of stock-breeding as “normal” nomads were supposed to do. It is generally agreed that the *Habiru* were such uprooted people¹⁶. Other similar groups might have been designated by the name *Sutu*, which was a generic term for inhabitants of the desert in the Late Bronze Age¹⁷.

The *Ahlamû* may have been people of the same kind: not an ethnic group strictly speaking, but people wandering in less densely populated areas and threatening sedentary communities¹⁸. The name *Ahlamû* is used for the first time, in the extant records, in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Most of the texts in which they appear, conveniently collected by M. Herles¹⁹, tend to present them as bellicose groups, wandering on the fringe of sedentary societies, quick to engage in military activities and to plunder caravans. No specific ethnic affiliation can be recognized for such groups and no specific material culture can thus be expected for them. They must have shared most of the cultural features of the other population groups and should thus be unrecognizable in the archaeological record. Their association with Aramaean groups may have been circumstantial, some Aramaeans joining the uprooted *Ahlamû* during a period of political disintegration. Seen in this perspective, the problem of the emergence of the Aramaeans would be more complex than a “simple” invasion of nomads.

Nomadism, tribalism and political integration

Turning now to the political context of the end of the Late Bronze Age, it must be observed that the last two centuries of this period were times of relative peace and social stability. The great powers —Hittites, Egyptians, Babylonians and Mitanni— were able to maintain a system of international relations that was beneficial to them all and ensured security to local communities. Unstable groups, such as nomads and uprooted communities, could be kept under sufficient control. The only factor of instability was the rivalry, firstly, between Hittites and Mitanni, then, between Hittites and Assyrians

14. Especially since the study of SCHWARTZ 1989. See also SADER 1992 & 2000; MASETTI-ROUAULT 2001a; SCHIEDEWIND 2002; YOUNGER Jr. 2007.

15. LIVERANI 1997.

16. BOTTÉRO 1971, cf. DURAND 2006, p. 563-581.

17. KUPPER 1957, p. 83-145; BRINKMAN 1968, p. 285-287; HELTZER 1981.

18. ZADOK 1991, p. 105-106, considers that the distinction between *Sutu* and *Ahlamû* is difficult to make.

19. HERLES 2007.

for the control of the western Jazireh. Soon after 1200 BC, this system collapsed. The Hittites could no longer resist the pressure of external elements on their western and northern periphery. The great powers no longer had the capacity of extending their protection over most of Syria-Palestine in exchange for contributions in manpower and goods delivered by the local communities.

The immediate result of these events was political chaos. The weakening of centralized political structures forced local population to adopt forms of organization that could no longer be based on a hierarchy of power represented by an administration headed by a king. The only possible alternative was kinship. Blood relations, be they real or fictitious, were an effective substitute to centralized administration to achieve social and political integration. Tribalism, illustrated by the increase of names of the type *Bît*+PN, became a prominent feature of the Early Iron Age.

Does tribalism mean nomadism? Not necessarily so. Tribalism can be found in sedentary populations as well. However, the collapse of the Late Bronze Age system favoured the development of centripetal groups, such as, we may assume, the *Ahlamû*. On the other hand, the decrease in resources, generated by the severance of international relations, resulted in an increase of the nomadic component of socio-economic life. The end result was a society marked by instability and internal conflicts, a situation that should not be viewed as marked by the emergence and expansion of nomadic groups which had remained unnoticed or inactive until then, but rather by a shift of balance between the two forms of socio-economic life within the same society.

It can thus be suggested that the Aramaeans were one of the Semitic groups of the end of the Late Bronze Age —not necessarily nomads or “full-time” nomads— who took advantage of the political chaos subsequent to the collapse of the Late Bronze Age political system to organize themselves along tribal lines and impose their power on the surviving but diminished political centres without replacing or, in the first stage at least, assimilating their population. It was more an elite phenomenon than a clash between “sedentary centres” and their “nomadic periphery”. The main effort of the new rulers aimed to reconstruct political structures based on Late Bronze Age models. The shaping of a specifically Aramaean culture—including a language, a religion, a distinct art form—is part of this effort of reconstruction. It was a long process effected with materials borrowed from various sources, such as the Phoenician alphabet or Syro-Hittite art form, as well as internal development such as the shaping of their own language.

RECONSTRUCTION – ARAMAEANS AND LUWIANS AT TELL AHMAR

A drastic reorganization of the space took place on the tell of Tell Ahmar after the end of Stratum 6. Thick mud-brick walls belonging to a massive structure form Stratum 5 (**fig. 1**). The eastern part of this structure, which was near the slope of the tell, was carried away by natural erosion and the western part was removed by the Thureau-Dangin excavations.

The walls of this stratum were the same size and same orientation as those of the “Bâtiment est” of the so-called “Aramaean level” of the Thureau-Dangin excavations (**fig. 5**). The space between the walls was filled with mud brick with hardly any other material visible, especially no pottery sherds, which would be surprising if the bricks came from the collapse of a structure. It is not impossible that the new walls served as foundations for a building contemporary with the “Bâtiment est” or even for the continuation of “Bâtiment est” itself.

Lack of material prevents from assigning a date to these walls. However as they were immediately below the Neo-Assyrian palace, that must be Late Iron II or Early Iron III in date, and above Stratum 6, which ended in Iron II, it is almost sure that they belonged to some time in the Iron Age II. It would be the level which witnessed the Assyrian conquest in 856, and it must have remained in use during the first years of the Assyrian domination until the palace was erected.

There is more information about this occupation period. A mosaic made of river pebbles disposed in checkerboard pattern was discovered in the western part of the acropolis (**fig. 6**). It can be assigned to

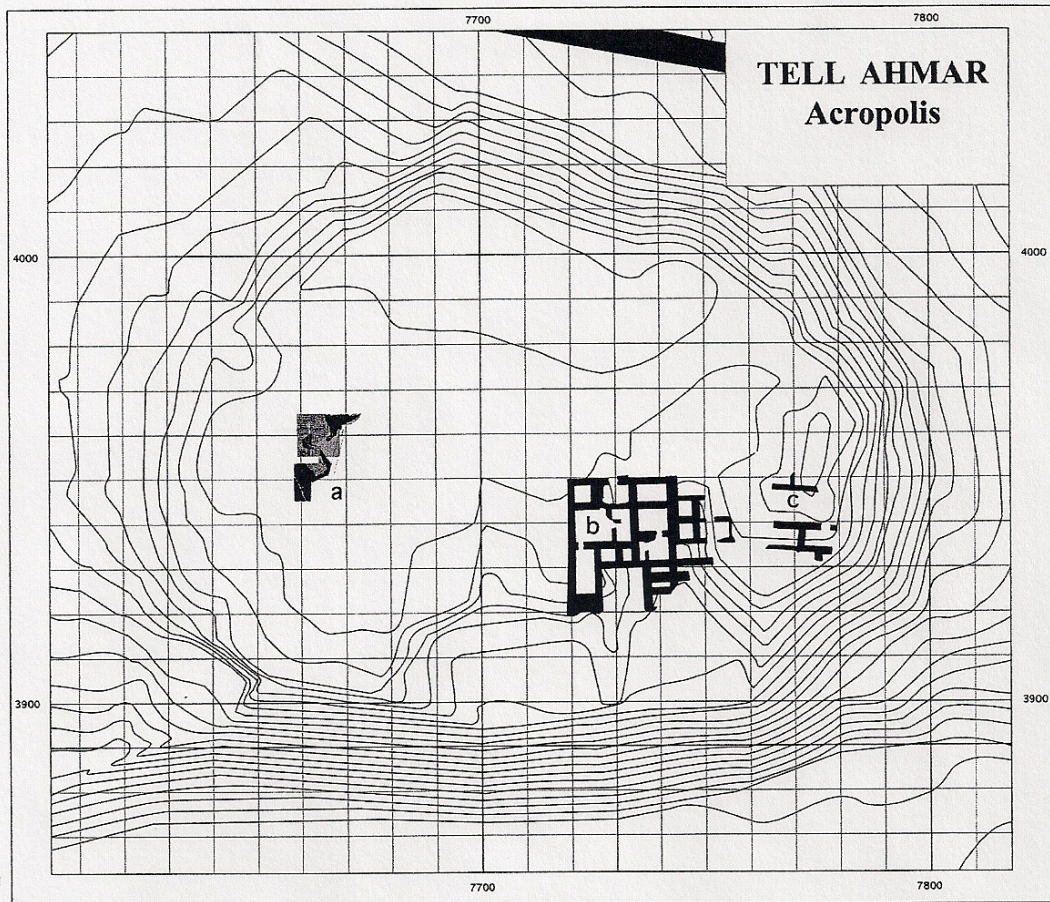


Figure 5: Plan of Iron Age II remains on the acropolis of Tell Ahmar: pebble mosaic pavement (a), “Bâtiment est” (b) and walls from Stratum 5 (c).

the same period as the thick walls in the eastern part of the tell on the basis of its stratigraphic position below the Assyrian palace. The mosaic pavement may have decorated a large building of which no wall has been preserved.

As soundings made in the Middle and Lower towns failed to expose anything earlier than the Iron Age, it is probably at a time contemporary with Stratum 5, i.e. during the Iron Age II, that the settlement spread to the low plateau to the west of the tell. The tell became an acropolis on which only a few official buildings were erected.

The lack of material prevents from assigning a specific *facies* to the culture associated with these structures. However, considering that its date is also that of the reliefs carved in Syro-Hittite style and of the Luwian inscriptions discovered out of their original context, it is clear that both Stratum 5 and the reliefs, together with the inscriptions, must belong to the same cultural horizon. We are thus brought back to the old problem of knowing who, from the Luwians and the Aramaeans, occupied Tell Ahmar—then named Til Barsib—on the eve of the Assyrian conquest. Suggestions have already been made elsewhere by the present author concerning this problem²⁰. They will be integrated in the discussion below.

20. BUNNENS 1995; 1999; 2006, p. 85-102. See, in general, n. 2, 3 above.



Figure 6: Pebble mosaic pavement from the western part of the acropolis of Tell Ahmar.

Semitic personal names in Luwian inscriptions

An interesting perspective is opened by the Luwian inscriptions from Tell Ahmar and its region. The starting point is a study of the personal names mentioned in these inscriptions. Most of them were written for a ruler called Hamiyata or for someone closely associated with him²¹. This name, Hamiyata, which does not seem to be specifically Luwian, can be explained as Semitic. It may be a Luwian rendering of common Semitic names such as 'ammi-yada', "my-(divine-)kinsman-knows(-me)" or 'ammi-Ad(d)a', "(H)adad-is-my-(divine-)kinsman"²². Hamiyata was the son of a usurper. The names of the two rulers of the ousted dynasty, whose name have been preserved, may also be explained as Semitic. *Hapatila*, name of the earliest known ruler, is usually understood as a Hurrian name²³, but a Semitic interpretation might be possible as well, e.g. 'Abd-Ila, "servant-of-God/El". And *Ariyahina*, which was the name of the father of the prince that recovered the throne after Hamiyata's death, might be another Semitic name combining elements such as 'Ari-, as in Hebrew 'Ari-'El, and/or a form of a verb such as ḤNN. Such names could have been born by Aramaeans.

Hamiyata and Ahuni

Historical circumstances during the period prior to the Assyrian conquest can also help to understand the situation at Tell Ahmar/Til Barsib. The Luwian inscriptions from the site and its neighbourhood are usually dated to the 10th century, or early 9th, on the basis of a stylistic comparison between the reliefs that decorated several of them with reliefs from Karkemiš that are dated to that period²⁴. The most informative of these Luwian inscriptions is that of the son of Ariyahina²⁵. It tells how the father of Ariyahina was dispossessed of the throne by one of his officials, who was the father of Hamiyata. Hamiyata succeeded his father, but promised Ariyahina's son to give the throne back to him. Ariyahina was probably too young to ascend the throne when this promise was made. However, when Hamiyata died, his son refused to fulfil his father's promise and Ariyahina's son had to fight to recover his heritage. The inscription celebrated his victory. If the interpretation of the personal names given above is correct, the conflict would have been between two Semitic speaking, possibly Aramaean, groups, although it cannot be ruled out that the two groups, or at least one of them, belonged to the traditional Semitic stock of the population as it is known from Late Bronze Age epigraphic evidence. Any how, the usurpers,

21. The texts are published by HAWKINS 2000, p. 224-248.

22. Cf. DALLEY 2000, p. 80.

23. LANDSBERGER 1948, p. 34, n. 70; DALLEY 2000, p. 80.

24. ORTHMANN 1971, p. 48; HAWKINS 2000, p. 225.

25. *Ibid.*, III.6. TELL AHMAR I, p. 239-243.

Hamiyata and his father, might have been Aramaeans and might thus illustrate an Aramaean takeover at Tell Ahmar.

However, the Assyrian inscriptions — namely Shalmaneser III's inscriptions — mention only Ahuni, of the tribe of Adini, in relation with Tell Ahmar/Til Barsib. Til Barsib would have been his stronghold and, in a few inscriptions, his royal city. On the strength of these inscriptions, many scholars consider that Til Barsib was the capital city of Ahuni and, by the same fact, of the land Bît Adini. But the texts are not that specific. Few texts, and most of them late in Shalmaneser III's reign, designate Til Barsib as Ahuni's royal city²⁶. Similarly, Shitamrat, where Ahuni fought his last battle, is usually described as his stronghold, and one text makes it the place where he had his residence and his possessions²⁷. Til Barsib seems thus to have been only one of the cities under his control. This leaves room for another ruler to have resided at Til Barsib.

It can thus be hypothesized that Hamiyata ruled at Tell Ahmar/Masuwari at the same time as Ahuni was the leader of the tribe of Adini. Hamiyata may have been a member of the same tribe. The tribal nature of Hamiyata's power is emphasized by the role "brothers", i.e. probably tribal kinsmen, played in the political structures of Tell Ahmar/Masuwari²⁸. Hamiyata, as a member of the tribe of Adini, would have ruled Tell Ahmar/Masuwari under Ahuni's supervision. The coup perpetrated by Hamiyata's father might be understood either as resulting from a rivalry between branches of the tribe of Adini or as an Aramaean takeover of a city ruled by rulers of another origin.

Luwians as an ethnic element are absent of this schema, which has the advantage of reconciling evidence drawn from Assyrian inscriptions with data gathered from inscriptions written in the Luwian language. There remains to explain why Aramaeans were using Syro-Hittite art style and the Luwian language.

Expansion of Bît Adini

Before proposing a solution, we need to have a look at the picture that emerges from the Assyrian inscriptions. The tribe of Adini was mentioned for the first time in 899 in an inscription of Adad-nîrârî II²⁹. The king was campaigning in the region of Huzirina, in the Saruj plain, when he received two female monkeys from "Bît Adini which lies on the bank of the Euphrates". A few years later, Aššurnâşirpal II fought against Ahiababa, from Bît Adini, who had seized power in Suru. He also campaigned as far as two cities, Dummetu and Azmu, which he described as cities of Bît Adini on the Euphrates towards Jebel Bishri. He also mentioned a few places that located Bît Adini in the western Jazireh up to the Euphrates river. It was in this context that Ahuni made his first appearance. No title was given to him. He was designated as "man of Bît Adini".

Ahuni and the tribe of Adini were thus active in the Tell Ahmar region and they were dominating cities, probably from the end of the 10th century and surely from the second quarter of the 9th century onwards. Such a situation was not essentially different from what can be gathered from Tiglath-pileser I's inscriptions. At that time already, Aramaeans were active along the Euphrates and, at that time already, cities belonging to the Aramaeans were mentioned³⁰. It has been denied that these cities could be real cities, because no mention was made of their being fortified. Scholars prefer to think that they were camps

26. GRAYSON 1996, A.0.102.6, II, line 58, p. 35; A.0.102.10, II, lines 38-39, p. 51; A.0.102.14, lines 36-37, p. 64; A.0.102.20, lines 9-10, p. 91.

27. *Ibid.*, A.0.102.2, II, lines 74-75, p. 22.

28. LIPINSKI 2000a, p. 187; BUNNENS 2006, p. 87; DION 1997, p. 271-275, tends to understand "brothers" in the context of Aramaean kingship in the literal sense of the word.

29. On the history of Bît Adini, see SADER 1987, p. 47-98; DION 1997, p. 86-98; LIPINSKI 2000a, p. 163-193.

30. GRAYSON 1991, A.0.87.1, V, line 59; A.0.87.13, line 7'. The possible existence of "communities of sedentary Aramaeans" at that time is acknowledge by SCHWARTZ 1989, p. 282.

or temporary settlements³¹. But, if such was the case, why mention them at all? The idea stems from the implicit presupposition that, in the Early Iron Age, Aramaeans could not be associated with cities. This, however, should not be accepted without further demonstration. The example of Pitru and Mutkinu, which Tiglath-pileser I would have conquered according to Shalmaneser III, tends to show the contrary. The real difference between Tiglath-pileser I's time and the time of Adad-nîrârî II, Aššurnāširpal II and Shalmaneser III is that more differentiation had been introduced in the reference to local population. Reference was no longer made to Aramaean *Ahlamû* or Aramaeans in general, but to specific tribes such as Bit Adini. The chaos subsequent to the collapse of the Late Bronze Age socio-political system was beginning to recede.

Tribal states —to use J. D. Hawkins' words³²— were beginning to emerge. The process was much less one of nomadic tribes overwhelming embryonic sedentary communities than one of reconstructing stable hierarchical political systems. As M. G. Masetti-Rouault has shown for the region of Terqa³³, Aramaean states must be seen as perpetuating as well as reshaping the Bronze Age heritage. This effort of reconstruction in the Tell Ahmar region intensified with Ahuni, assumedly Bit Adini's leader. Ahuni was uniting under his control a series of sedentary settlements. In Shalmaneser III's inscriptions the picture got more detailed than before. More cities were said to belong to Ahuni personally, not to Bit Adini in general as in other 9th century inscriptions. And these cities were also found to the west of the Euphrates, for instance Nappigi, modern Menbij, and Dabigu, probably Dabiq on the Qweiq river, as if, with Ahuni, the tribe of Adini had been expanding further west. The balance between nomadism and sedentism, within the society, was again leaning towards sedentism.

Aramaean culture or acculturation?

The cultural tools to achieve this reconstruction could not be but the same as those of the Late Bronze Age, namely states centered on a capital city, ruled by a king living in a palace, with officials to assist him and means of propaganda consisting of inscriptions and works of art glorifying the king. In the particular case of Tell Ahmar, the task was made easier by the fact that, about 20 km to the north of the site, Karkemiš, from which the Hittites had ruled all North Syria, had passed through the crisis with much less damage than many other city-states of the region. At that time, monumental inscriptions at Karkemiš were written in Luwian and art style was Syro-Hittite. The new rulers of Tell Ahmar were naturally led to use the same language for their own inscriptions and the same style for their stelae and wall reliefs.

Even the name used in Luwian inscriptions to designate Tell Ahmar, Masuwari, may have been borrowed from an older tradition. M. Makinson has hypothesized that it derived from Mušur, which was the name that, according to him, the Assyrians of the Middle Assyrian period gave to the region of Tell Ahmar³⁴. If, as it is likely, the Luwian inscriptions from Tell Ahmar were written for Aramaean rulers, we may assume that Masuwari was preferred to Til Barsib, which sounds more Semitic and could mean something like "Well(or Son)-of-the-Old-Man", because it had a more prestigious connotation.

The only new factor was the emergence of the Aramaeans as a new ethnic element, together with Aramaic as a new language within the West Semitic family. Again, the present writer would tend to see this phenomenon as resulting more from internal developments within the society than from a conquest by nomads coming from the Jebel Bishri region or another region of the Near East. A comparison with the transition from the late Roman empire to the early Middle Ages can shed light on the process. At that time too, political power, weakened by a series of internal factors, could no longer resist external pressure

31. SADER 2000, p. 65.

32. HAWKINS 1982, p. 375, referring to Bit Adini.

33. MASETTI-ROUAULT 2001a. Similar ideas were expressed, apparently independently, by NOVÁK 2005.

34. MAKINSON 2002-2005, cf. BUNNENS 2006, p. 88-94.

from tribal groups, in this case essentially German tribes. There were invasions but these invasions did not significantly alter the composition of local populations. This is proven by the fact that most regions affected by the invasions continued to speak a language that was close to Latin. Toponymy could be altered. For instance, both France and Andalusia derived their name from that of a Germanic tribe, the Franks in the first case and the Vandals in the second, but neither of these regions speaks a Germanic language. The invasions had less affected the society than the collapse of the central power. The same may have happened at the beginning of the Iron Age. For some unknown reason, a tribe or a group of tribes that identified themselves as Aramaeans joined the homeless *Ahlamû* and expanded at the expense of other tribal groups, subduing other communities and starting to form a ruling elite.

As for the Aramaic language, it probably evolved from the Semitic languages spoken in the Late Bronze Age in the same way as Romance languages evolved from Latin. There is no need to hypothesize the invasion of "Romance people" to explain the emergence of Romance languages. There is no need either to hypothesize the spread of a linguistic group, that had remained unnoticed until then, to explain the emergence of Aramaic. Aramaic, as an autonomous language, was a product of the Iron Age. How long did it take for the local population to adopt the language of their new rulers? Suggestions concerning this will be made in the last section of this paper.

THE ASSYRIAN CONQUEST – THE FIRST YEARS OF ASSYRIAN DOMINATION

Permanence of architecture

Shalmaneser III prided himself of having built a palace at Til Barsib which he had renamed Kâr-Shalmaneser³⁵. It is doubtful, however, whether he actually built a new structure. It is more likely that he just renovated an existing palace. Support for this is found in the Tell Ahmar stratigraphy. Between the Assyrian palace, which can hardly be older than the 8th century, and the Iron Age I/II houses of strata 7 and 6, only the walls that form stratum 5, together with Thureau-Dangin's "Bâtiment est", can be interpreted as monumental enough to represent structures associated with a central power. The Aramaean structures remained thus in use for a few decades after the Assyrian conquest.

Permanence of Luwian

It is not just Aramaean architecture that survived. An inscription of a governor of Kâr-Shalmaneser, dating from the first half of the 8th century, shows that there was also a permanence in the use of languages. Ninurta-bêl-uşur, who presented himself as a eunuch, servant of the *turtânu* Šamši-ilu, and governor of Kâr-Shalmaneser, had a trilingual inscription carved on a gate lion at Arslan Tash³⁶. The languages were Akkadian, Aramaic and, quite surprisingly more than sixty years after the Assyrian conquest, Luwian. Besides the use of Luwian, another surprising fact was the name used by Ninurta-bêl-uşur to refer to Tell Ahmar in the Luwian version of his inscription³⁷. It was Masuwari, the very same name as the one used in earlier, pre-Assyrian, Luwian inscriptions. This is the more surprising as, in the Aramaic inscription, Ninurta-bêl-uşur used the name Kâr-Shalmaneser as he did in Akkadian. Luwian tradition, at Tell Ahmar/Kâr-Shalmaneser, did not come to a halt with the Assyrian conquest.

35. GRAYSON 1996, A.0.102.2, II, lines 33-34.

36. I thank W. Röllig and H. D. Galter for showing me transliterations and translations of the still unpublished Assyrian and Aramaic inscriptions of Ninurta-bêl-uşur. See provisionally RÖLLIG 2000, p. 182-183; GALTER 2003; 2004.

37. Published by HAWKINS 2000, III.10. ARSLANTAŞ, p. 246-248.

Assyrian governor or local prince?

In other Aramaic and Akkadian inscriptions from Arslan Tash, the same Ninurta-bêl-uşur spoke of himself as of an independent ruler. Especially noteworthy were the reference he made to the “land of the house of my father” and the curse at the end of the inscriptions against “another prince” who would place his name instead of the name of Ninurta-bêl-uşur. It is as if a local prince had been appointed governor of Kâr-Shalmaneser.

With this in mind, it is possible to go back to the inscription of Ariyahina’s son mentioned above. If we admit that Hamiyata was a member of the tribe of Adini ruling Tell Ahmar/Masuwari under Ahuni’s supervision, couldn’t we imagine that Ariyahina’s son recovered his throne from the son of Hamiyata with the help of the Assyrians? And that he was appointed governor of the newly conquered city? His case would be similar to that of Adad-yisi’i, who was ruling Guzana (modern Tell Halaf) with the title of “king” in Aramaic and “governor” in Akkadian³⁸.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from Ninurta-bêl-uşur’s inscriptions is that Šamši-ilu was not governor of Kâr-Shalmaneser/Til Barsib. The city was under Ninurta-bêl-uşur’s immediate authority and only secondarily under Šamši-ilu’s power. This weakens the possibility that Šamši-ilu had his residence at Tell Ahmar as is often assumed by scholars. The idea stemmed from the words “my lordly city” referring to Tell Ahmar in the inscription of Šamši-ilu carved on the two lions that adorned the east gate of Tell Ahmar³⁹. As the inscription was written in the style of a royal inscription, it was admitted that Šamši-ilu behaved as a local ruler with his capital city at Tell Ahmar. Although it can be admitted that Šamši-ilu behaved as a local ruler, his capital city must have been located elsewhere.

Šamši-ilu at Tell Ahmar

The only available evidence on the Assyrian presence at Tell Ahmar prior to the building of the palace is precisely this inscription of Šamši-ilu. It can be inferred from this inscription that the lions were made on Šamši-ilu’s order as was probably also the gate. It is even possible that the entire city wall was built at that time. Any how, there is no indication that the settlement extended to the north of the tell before the Assyrian period.

There is a striking contrast between the lions that Ninurta-bêl-uşur, Šamši-ilu’s eunuch, placed at one of the gates of Arslan Tash⁴⁰ and the two lions that Šamši-ilu set up at the east gate of Tell Ahmar. The Arslan Tash lions were much closer to Assyrian prototypes as a comparison with a gate lion from Nimrud will show (fig. 7). The Tell Ahmar lions, on the contrary, although they were in the Assyrian tradition⁴¹, were still close to Syro-Hittite models, as a comparison with a lion from Havuzköy will show (fig. 8)⁴². This is another indication that the Assyrian conquest did not put a sudden end to local traditions.

The first years of the Assyrian domination over Tell Ahmar witnessed a progressive dilution of Syro-Hittite tradition into the Assyrian life style, but the ruling elite probably remained Aramaean.

38. ABOU ASSAF, BORDREUIL & MILLARD 1982; GRAYSON 1991, A.0.101.1006.2004, p. 389-391, for the Assyrian inscription only.

39. GRAYSON 1996, A.0.104.2010, l. 19-20, p. 233.

40. THUREAU-DANGIN et al., 1932, p. 70-73, pl. VI, and p. 74-75, pl. XIV/2, cf. GALTER 2003.

41. ROOBAERT 1990.

42. VON DER OSTEN 1929, p. 71, fig. 78; p. 72, fig. 79; ORTHMANN 1971, p. 186.

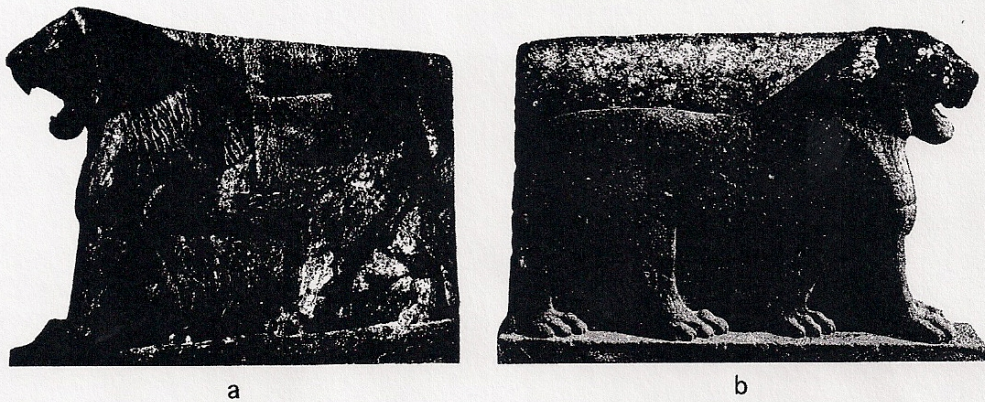


Figure 7a: Lion erected at Arslan Tash by Ninurta-bêl-ušur, eunuch of Šamši-ilu and governor of Kâr-Shalmaneser (THUREAU-DANGIN et al. 1932, pl. VI.2); 7b: portal lion from Nimrud (ORTHMANN 1975, fig. 174).

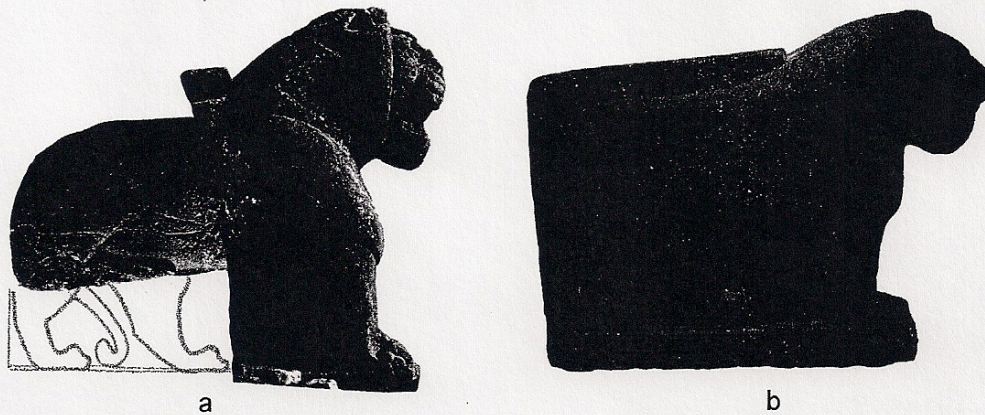


Figure 8a: Lion erected by Šamši-ilu at Tell Ahmar; 8b: Syro-Hittite lion from Havuzköy.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ASSYRIAN *KOINE* – APOGEE OF THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Tell Ahmar in the 7th century was a site similar to other Neo-Assyrian provincial centres, such as Zincirli, Karkemiš, Tell Halaf and others, and it shared many features with sites of Assyria proper, especially Nimrud⁴³.

Interrelations between centre and periphery

The latter part of the Assyrian empire, from the second half of the 8th century onwards, was a time of internal peace. War was confined to the marches of the empire and intense relations developed between the territories submitted to Assyrian rule. Exchanges between centre and periphery reached a level never attained before⁴⁴. It is not just the Assyrian dominions that borrowed administrative practices, customs and art style from the centre, but Assyria itself was keen to adopt styles and luxury goods coming from the periphery, especially the western periphery. This movement accelerated under Sennacherib's reign in the late 8th and early 7th century.

43. For a general overview, see BUNNENS 1997; ROOBAERT & BUNNENS 1999, p. 167-172.

44. WINTER 1982.

Aramaic as an Assyrian administrative language

The 8th century is also the time when Aramaic tablets as well as Assyrian tablets with Aramaic ink notations started to be found at various sites from Assyria to North Syria⁴⁵. It is on Tiglath-pileser III's reliefs, in the mid 8th century, that a scribe writing on a roll, assuredly in Aramaic, appeared for the first time alongside another scribe writing on a clay tablet. Aramaic had become an administrative language on a par with Akkadian. Not only the language became prominent in the administration, even for officials that were not of Aramaean origin, but people coming from the west could also occupy high positions in the same administration⁴⁶. This is not surprising if we remember that the ruling class, who was predominantly Aramaean in the West, probably remained in place, without significant changes, after the conquest. Local princes became Assyrian officials and they were thus able to pursue a career in the administration.

The result of this was that Aramaic was reintroduced in the West as a practice imposed by the centre on its periphery. Mario Fales observed that the Aramaic of the texts discovered at Shiyukh Fawqâni, near Tell Ahmar, was a kind of "pidgin" Aramaic⁴⁷, i.e. Aramaic written by scribes that did not know the language very well. Could this have been the case if the tablets had been written by and for Aramaeans? It is more likely that Assyrian officials, whatever their origins, were trained in both Akkadian and Aramaic, which they wrote with uneven success in the provinces where they were employed. The Aramaic language was part of the cultural *koine* that was taking shape in the last century of the Assyrian empire.

Aramaic remained in use in the Achaemenid administration and, from that time onwards, it spread to the rest of the population to become, in a few centuries, the most commonly spoken language of the Near East, exactly as Latin in the western part of the Roman empire progressively lost its status of administrative language of the conquerors to become the language spoken by everyone.

CONCLUSION

The encounter between Assyrians and Aramaeans, seen from Tell Ahmar, can be viewed as follows. At the end of the Late Bronze Age the collapse of centralized socio-political structures caused a reversion to tribal forms of organization and let unstable groups, such as outlaws and uprooted people expand to the detriment of sedentary settlements that were reduced in size. Severance of international relations put economic constraints on these settlements, which led to an intensification of the exploitation of marginal areas through the development of pastoralist activities. The *Ahlamû*, one of these groups of uprooted people, associated with Aramaeans, who were probably one of the Semitic groups of the Late Bronze Age, fomented unrest along the Euphrates river.

In the late 12th and early 11th century, the Middle Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser I and Aššur-bêl-kala, tried to restore the power some of their predecessors had exerted on the Middle Euphrates, especially in the Tell Ahmar region that may have been known as Mušur at that time. Their attempt failed.

In the 10th century, Aramaeans were organised in distinct tribes that were trying to dominate specific territories ruled from cities in which they had seized power. A branch of the tribe of Adini, represented by Hamiyata and his father, was established at Tell Ahmar that they called Masuwari, probably perpetuating the Middle Assyrian name Mušur. At the same time, the site could be designated by a more specifically Aramaean name: Til Barsib, "Well(or Son)-of-the-Old-Man". Aramaic was probably the language of the ruling elite, which, for their propaganda purposes, were using stelae and reliefs in Syro-Hittite style and display inscriptions in the Luwian language. The traditional socio-political order, as it was prevailing in Bronze Age city-states, was progressively restored.

45. RÖLLIG 2000, p. 183-184, notes that the bulk of the Aramaic tablets and dockets date from the 7th century.

46. GARELLI 1982; TADMOR 1982.

47. FALES 1999, p. 629.

In the 9th century, the Assyrians were on the Euphrates again, fighting against the tribe of Adini to establish a firm hold on a crossing point of the river. Shalmaneser III succeeded in subduing Tell Ahmar/Til Barsib, which he turned into a provincial capital of his nascent empire. The organisation of the site does not seem to have been especially affected by the conquest. It is even possible that a local ruler was appointed as the local governor. Still in the first half of the 8th century, a governor of Tell Ahmar/Kâr-Shalmaneser was using Luwian, alongside Akkadian and Aramaic, in his own inscriptions written in the style of a ruler's inscriptions.

Things changed in the course of the 8th century and accelerated under Sennacherib's reign in the late 8th and early 7th century. A kind of cultural *koine* spread throughout the Assyrian empire. As part of this *koine*, Aramaic was introduced as an administrative language and progressively also became the most commonly spoken language of the Near East.